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## Housing crisis:

# Build Homes

## Cap Rents

**Kris O'Sullivan, Coventry Socialist Students**

There is a housing crisis in this country and it's affecting you and me. We don't know each other but we share one thing in common: we both need a roof over our heads.

However, even this basic human requirement is harder and harder to come by. We see extensive council house sell-offs, predatory private landlords, welfare cuts - and meagre government housing quotas not being met. We are ending up with a dangerous cocktail we cannot afford to swallow.

To make things worse, there are now more than 1.5 million families with children at the mercy of private landlords - compared with just 566,000 in 2004. Unlike people who live in social housing, private tenants have little long-term security. Tenancy agreements can last 12 months, or even only six, making it difficult for families to settle in communities and schools.

The average time tenants live in a privately rented home before being forced to move is just three and a half years. Compare this with eleven and a half years in social housing, and more than 17 years for owner-occupiers.

In addition, rents have been rising faster than inflation for some time. In London, private tenants on average pay half their pre-tax income in rent. More and more working people rely on housing benefit due to poverty pay.

And this is not even to mention the growing tragedy of homelessness.

It all adds up to working class people - especially the young and most disadvantaged in society - being priced out of communities and a dignified standard of living. But renters are starting to fight back. Campaigns have sprung up all around the country, defending council homes from sell-off and campaigning for a better deal in private tenancies.

Students are among those exploited. As a student myself, I have seen that struggle can attract people fed up with their situation.

Coventry Socialist Students has been fighting for a student-run letting agency to ensure affordable rents and quality housing. We have also been working to organise a student tenants' union, and disrupting housing fairs to send a clear message to predatory landlords: there is no room for unfair housing.

The housing market is nothing more than a cash cow for the rich. Mortgage lenders leech off owners; most landlords leech off tenants. The Socialist Party stands for a massive programme of council house building, and rent controls in the private sector.

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# Socialist change to remedy climate change

## Nationalise the giant corporations to fund millions of 'green' jobs

**Kate Jones, Socialist Party Wales**

This week's 'It's time to act' march will see many thousands on the streets of London calling for meaningful action to combat devastating climate change.

Action against climate change is being taken not only by 'greens' and eco-warriors, but working class people and the labour movement. Many national trade unions, as well as the National Union of Students, have taken the historic step of coming together to call for a national programme of government-funded new climate jobs.

Such a massive programme of public works would be on a scale not seen since the creation of the National Health Service in the 1940s.

The report - A Million Climate Jobs - shows how to achieve a dramatic reduction in energy consumption, greatly increased energy efficiency, and a programme of renovation and insulation of all homes and public buildings, to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 40%.

At the same time, wind (mainly offshore) along with wave, tidal and solar power could generate twice as much total electricity as now, and all of it renewable - enough to meet the energy needs of buildings, transport and industry, etc.

While a handful of climate change 'sceptics' still pretend that a low-carbon economy would mean a return to the dark ages, such a switch would actually create skilled jobs on a massive scale.

Manufacturing wind, wave and tidal turbines, the construction of tidal lagoons and barrages, zero-carbon buildings, efficient electric vehicles, rail and other transport infrastructure - these could easily add up to a million and more new jobs here in Britain.

The trade unions are right to call for government action to achieve this.

However, none of the establishment parties support such a radical plan as they are subservient to big business - a capitalist system that puts the pursuit of profit for a rich minority ahead of the worldwide needs of billions of people. All the more pressing reason therefore to build a socialist electoral alternative in the coming elections (see page 5).

The recent fall in oil prices shows just how vulnerable national economies are to the vagaries of the capitalist market.

From the Canadian tar sands to the oil and gas rigs of the North Sea, thousands of jobs are disappearing. Meanwhile, many plans to develop new sources of oil and gas have been mothballed.

A socialist plan for energy production, geared to the needs of the planet and its people, is the only long term solution.

While 'A Million Climate Jobs' calls for an expansion of rail transport, and its renationalisation, the Socialist Party would go much further.

We believe that the transformation of entire industries will require nationalisation of the key players - banks, energy companies, and the big corporations that dominate construction and manufacturing. Democratic socialist nationalisation would form the basis of a sustainable plan of production.

Only that way can we guarantee the kind of future envisaged by the report and by the many thousands who will be marching for the climate on 7 March.

## **It's Time to Act climate march Saturday 7 March**

Assemble: Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A at 12:30pm. March sets off at 1pm, rally about 2.15pm outside Parliament (Abingdon Street).

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## **Man of straw - is cut to size**

**Peter and Kay Harris were among six supporters of Militant (forerunner of the Socialist) who were witch-hunted out of Blackburn Labour Party at the behest of local MP Jack Straw back in the early 1980s. Straw, together with Neil Kinnock and later Tony Blair, expanded these purges of socialists and swung the party to the right, turning it into an out-and-out pro-capitalist party.**

**Peter and Kay say they were "absolutely disgusted, but not surprised" to find out about former Labour cabinet minister Straw and Tory bigwig Malcolm Rifkind's 'indiscretions', ie putting themselves up for hire to big business.**

On Straw they comment:

"This MP is 15th in the list of highest outside salary earners on top of his parliamentary wage. His use of his former high profile cabinet positions has clearly made him a very wealthy man on the back of the labour movement.

How such a man can demand £5,000 a day to give speeches on behalf of business ventures is obscene, particularly when that is compared to the miserable salaries or benefits that his working class constituents in Blackburn have to survive on.

Blackburn Labour controlled council is also making savage cuts to the most vulnerable sectors in the town, cutting even services for the elderly and disabled.

Straw uses the word "integrity" a lot! Yet here is a man who should be ashamed of his political history. His record includes helping force through the war in Iraq, covering up the Hillsborough catastrophe and aiding the extraordinary rendition of suspects (many of them totally innocent) from one country to another. Such a record would earn him a place in a political hall of notoriety.

Straw recently apologised to the six Blackburn Militant supporters for outrageous, unfounded allegations in his recent autobiography. Blackburn Labour Party members who rallied to Jack Straw's support 30 years ago when he was a key figure involved in expelling six hard working Militant supporter activists, should hang their heads in shame.

One former key Straw supporter, an ex-Labour mayor, has joined Ukip! It is these people who used the Labour Party to further their careers and bank balances. Time has shown that they were the real infiltrators and wreckers!

Compare their actions to the policies put forward by Socialist Party members in TUSC concerning MPs' salaries and right of recall.

In the 1980s and 1990s Militant-supporting Labour MPs Dave Nellist, the late Terry Fields and Pat Wall, only took the average wage of a worker.

Jack Straw in our eyes epitomises everything that is wrong with the main political parties and their representatives."

**Peter and Kay Harris**

**In his autobiography Last Man Standing, published in 2013, Straw made up some more lies about Peter and Kay, which were answered in full - see [www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/771](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/771)**

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## **Advisors to the rich and despotic**

Aside from pursuing their greedy business interests, both MPs Jack Straw and Malcolm Rifkind happen to be keen advisors to the Global Strategy Forum - a cosy club for the rich to have chummy debates on foreign affairs, defence and international security issues.

Another advisor of this elite debating society is Tory former Chancellor Lord Lamont, who also serves alongside Straw on the Eurasian Council of Foreign Affairs, funded by the despotic regime of Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazerbayev.

In 1998 former Chilean dictator, General Augusto Pinochet visited Britain to obtain medical treatment. He was detained by the then Labour home secretary Jack Straw pending extradition to Spain to face human rights charges.

Lamont rallied to Pinochet's defence describing the ex-torturer as a "good and brave and honourable soldier". Straw was moved to ignore the extradition request and returned Pinochet to Chile on the grounds of "ill health".

**Thanks to Mike Barker**

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## **Ukip dumps toxic 'cash-for-questions' Hamilton**

The first 'cash-for-questions' scandal involved anti-trade union, pro-Apartheid, pro-NHS privatisation, Tory MP Neil Hamilton.

He was branded "a liar and a cheat" after his libel case against the Guardian collapsed in 1996.

A 1997 parliamentary inquiry found Hamilton guilty of soliciting money from rich magnates and big business to influence government policy. He also lost a libel suit against Mohammed al-Fayed after the Harrods owner reported that Hamilton had accepted his cash stuffed into 'brown envelopes'. In the 1997 general election Hamilton was defeated.

Hamilton resumed his political career when elected to the ruling national executive of Ukip in 2011. However, further alleged financial scandals weren't far behind and late last year the hapless sleazeball quit as a prospective parliamentary Ukip candidate.

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# Forbes list gives the lie to austerity - join the Socialists to fight it!

Sarah-Sachs Eldridge, Socialist Party national organiser

The Forbes rich list proves there's no austerity for the super-rich.

In Britain, the richest five people and families have a combined (and obscene) wealth of over £35 billion. Otherwise known as more money than Tory chancellor Osborne wants to cut in the next budget.

The Socialist Party fights for a world where that vast wealth is no longer hoarded by a few individuals. Instead, use of resources is democratically planned to end the misery of poverty and exploitation worldwide.

The London-based Hinduja brothers top the UK list with around £10 billion. Meanwhile, the Resolution Foundation estimates only £1.4 billion a year could pay Britain's 1.4 million care workers a living wage.

## Exploiters

But the Tories plough on - because they represent the capitalist class, the super-rich exploiters. Labour offers no opposition: only five of its MPs bothered to vote against Osborne's £30 billion cuts budget. The so-called 'people's army' - Nigel Farage's Ukip - is in favour of £35 billion of cuts.

The Forbes figures prove cuts are not 'necessary' - the money is there. But we have to fight for it.

The Socialist Party fights for an alternative - a world run in the interests of the billions, not the billionaires. If you agree, then join us and help build the Socialist Party.

■ Visit [socialistparty.org.uk/join](http://socialistparty.org.uk/join), email [join@socialistparty.org.uk](mailto:join@socialistparty.org.uk), text 0776 1818 206 or call 020 8988 8777.

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## Them & Us

### Late for supper

Almost 100,000 children in poor families went hungry last year because of government cuts or sanctions imposed on their parents' benefits.

Research carried out by a coalition of churches found that over one million benefit sanctions were imposed last year - often for trivial reasons - although more than 120,000 of those decisions were overturned on appeal.

Unbelievably, more than 100 people with severe mental health problems were sanctioned every day.

Niall Cooper, of Church Action on Poverty, which helped write the report, said: "If you commit a crime, no court is allowed to make you go hungry as a punishment. But if you're late for an appointment at the Jobcentre they can remove all your income and leave you unable to feed you or your family for weeks."

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## **Landlord country**

Private landlords are quids-in thanks to government policies. Campaign group Generation Rent reckons that private landlords are receiving an astonishing £77.7 billion a year - £42.3 billion in rent and £35.4 billion in rising house prices - the same size as Morocco's economy!

Some £9.3 billion in housing benefit paid to low income households is pocketed by private landlords, which if invested in public housing instead, would mean well over 100,000 new council homes.

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## **Normal exploitation**

Exploitative zero-hour contracts are 'now the norm' according to research by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) having increased by 110,000 in a year.

The TUC reckons that zero-hours workers earn £300 a week less on average than those on permanent contracts, and that two in five are paid less than £111 a week, therefore failing to qualify for statutory sick pay. Some workers may also miss out on statutory redundancy pay, the right to return to their job after maternity leave and protection from unfair dismissal.

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## **Social injustice**

In 2013, when the Con-Dem government was pushing severe legal aid cuts in social welfare law through parliament, Labour shadow justice minister Sadiq Khan said legal aid is "important to stop miscarriages of justice", as the Birmingham Six case proved.

Sadiq Khan is still shadow justice minister but today he says a Labour government 'could not reinstate' £600 million worth of legal aid cuts imposed by the Con-Dem administration.

Have they not read the press reports on how legal aid cuts are forcing lawyers to withhold services for people needing help with such matters as domestic abuse and racism?

Labour seems totally unwilling to reverse the effects of this attack on ordinary people's legal rights. If a possible future Miliband government is afraid of challenging any spending cuts, what hope for social justice under Labour?

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## **What We Saw**

### **Michael Sheen speaks out against NHS cuts and privatisation**

[www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/02/michael-sheen-nhs-cuts-speech](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/02/michael-sheen-nhs-cuts-speech)

Speaking in Tredegar, Wales, the birthplace of National Health Service (NHS) founder Nye Bevan, actor Michael Sheen accused establishment politicians of wanting to privatise the NHS.

"There are plenty out there who believe in grabbing as much as you can," he said. Adding: "They won't say it of course, they're too smart for that."

He continued: "The Labour government arguably did as much damage as any Tory or coalition government, this is about who we want to be and what we believe is worth fighting for."

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## International Women's Day 2015

# Women and new unionism: lessons for today

**As women and men around the world celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March, women workers are bearing the brunt of austerity. The Fawcett Society has reported that the pay gap in the UK between men and women is 14.9%. 64% of low paid workers are women. 92% of lone parents are women and most likely to live in poverty. Costs of childcare are among the highest in the world.**

**These conditions mean women are being thrown to the forefront of anti-austerity struggles. When considering what the most effective ways are to fight back industrially and politically, lessons from the many improvements won by women in the past are vital.**

**Here Heather Rawling looks at the lessons of new unionism for the struggle for women workers today.**

Socialists are often the memory of the working class. History books studied at school and the capitalist media give either a distorted view of the role of the working class in historical movements or ignore it completely. This is even more the case for women 'hidden from history', their stories often told, if at all, from a middle class or male perspective. It is the job of socialists to revisit the past to remember, be inspired by, and learn from, previous struggles.

In the late 19th century British imperialism was weakening. Although still a powerful economic power, Britain had gone into relative decline against the new economies of Germany and the US.

Skilled and craft workers had previously been able to win concessions from their employers using the craft unions they had developed to represent them. Membership was strictly limited to apprenticed workers and subscription rates were high, so women and other semi-skilled and unskilled workers were excluded. Only 5% of the workforce was organised.

The unions tended to be moderate and protectionist - limiting the number of skilled workers to protect their wages. They became known as the 'aristocracy of labour'. However, the numbers of low paid, unskilled workers were growing in the towns and cities. Many of these workers were women.

By the 1880s, casual and 'sweated' labour dominated the East End of London.

In the summer of 1888 1,400 workers - mostly young women and girls - walked out of Bryant and May's match factory in Bow, east London. This strike was to become the launch pad for 'new unionism', which led to the development of new general unions for the vast army of unskilled workers. It also played a major role in the formation of the first mass workers' party in Britain - the Labour Party.

## **Inspiration**

News of the matchworkers' dispute spread and had an impact on unskilled women workers as far away as Ireland. Shirtmakers in Derry contacted the local branch of the boilermakers' union and asked to be allowed membership.

The boilermakers asked the Derry Trades Council for advice and Eleanor Marx, revolutionary activist and daughter of socialist thinker Karl Marx, was enlisted to advise them. Consequently, Derry Trades Council became only the second to admit women and unskilled workers.

After the matchwomen's victory there was an upsurge in industrial action. The Times recorded more than double the numbers of strikes per quarter in the first half of 1889, after the match strike, as in the first half of 1888, before the strike.

And these records are not exhaustive: strikes of women cigar makers in Nottingham and tin box makers in London are not shown. Neither are the strikes by women workers at mills in Kilmarnock and woollen weavers in Wakefield.

## **Great Dock Strike**

The Great Dock Strike was one of the most celebrated of this period. In fact, the dockers were among groups of workers that contacted the Union of Women Matchmakers to ask for advice in establishing their own organisations. Like the matchwomen, they were also casual labourers.

Capitalism dictates that the interests of working class women and men are inextricably bound together. The struggle for better pay and conditions, and against injustice and exploitation, draws women and men together to fight for their common interests.

The Port of London was a massive employer and an estimated 15,000 families depended upon port work. 90% of workers were casual, just like many workers today on zero-hour contracts. With high unemployment, competition for jobs was intense and pitted desperate docker against docker. The matchwomen responded enthusiastically to the call of the dockworkers and others for help.

On 14 August 1889, Ben Tillet, socialist and general secretary of the Tea Operatives and General Labourers' Association was suddenly called to a dispute at the South West India docks. Men had refused to work over the employers' failure to pay them their bonus. Union organiser Tom Mann, whose politics were influenced by his reading of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' Communist Manifesto, was also present and he saw how the men had been inspired by the matchwomen.

Mann showed that the matchwomen were better strategists than any of the "learned ladies and gentlemen of the Fabian Society", whose tactics were to write exposés in the press. Union organisation, strike action and solidarity with other workers brought the women success - not a reliance on convincing the rich and powerful of their just cause.

The Great Dock Strike spread to other workers - stevedores, ship painters dockyard mechanics, carpenters, biscuit and jam factories, to name a few. The biscuit and jam factories employed mainly women. In fact many matchwomen worked in the jam factories during summer when the

match trade was slack. Newspapers referred to "London on strike". The East London Observer asked: "Is the strike a socialist rising?"

## **Rent strike**

Women played an important role by declaring a rent strike. Banners were strung across Commercial Road and read: "Husbands are on strike: landlords need not call here". They promised not to pay the rent until the strike was over. The dockers were almost starved back to work but international solidarity came to the rescue. £30,000 was donated by Australian port workers.

Eventually the dock company agreed to almost all the strikers' demands. Hundreds of new unions and trades councils were established over the next few years and old unions were revitalised as the gains of the unskilled workers spread to the wider movement. This was despite the efforts of right wingers like Henry Broadhurst, a Liberal trade unionist and MP who opposed change. Broadhurst became increasingly isolated and was pushed aside by history. The right wing leadership in some of our trade unions today should beware. They will also be tossed aside when workers move to improve their pay and working conditions and find their leaders a block to achieving their aims.

## **Counter-offensive**

At first, the employers were caught by surprise by the scale and suddenness of events. However, the employers regrouped, launched an offensive and went back on the deal they had struck. There are lessons here for today. Even when workers move might and main to achieve better conditions, any gains are only temporary. Only socialism can bring about lasting change and improvement in workers lives.

The employers' counteroffensive was later sealed with two legal decisions: Lyons v Wilkins in 1896 which outlawed picketing, and the infamous Taff Vale ruling of 1901 which enabled employers to sue unions for losses resulting from strike action. These rulings convinced many workers of the need for political representation in parliament.

In March 1889, workers at the Beckton Gas Works were made redundant. Will Thorne and Ben Tillet formed an organising committee and the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers was born. 800 members were signed up. News of the meeting spread like wildfire and they pledged to fight for the eight hour day. Socialists were involved in the creation of the union from the outset.

Sunday morning 'crusades' recruited men at other gasworks to the union and membership grew to 3,000. The union quickly won a reduction in the working day from 12 hour to eight hour shifts, an extra shilling's wages per week and one less shift per fortnight. Success breeds success. In June, tram workers organised a rally and the atmosphere in the East End was explosive.

## **Manningham Mills**

At the end of 1890 a 19 week strike by a largely female workforce at Manningham Mills in Bradford began. The workers had seen their wages reduced year on year, just as the real value of wages today has been reducing since the start of the recession. They were facing another reduction in wages. They could take no more. 5,000 workers came out on strike.

Learning from the matchwomen, they immediately appealed to other workers and trade unionists for funds. Disturbances broke out when the authorities tried to prevent the strikers from holding mass meetings and rallies. There was a riot in Bradford city centre and the Durham Light Infantry made bayonet charges. Just like in Ireland today with the arrests and imprisonment of protesters

against the attempt to introduce water charges, the state will attempt to crush movements of workers when they threaten the interests of the rich and powerful.

Unfortunately the Manningham strike failed but it left a rich legacy: there was a growth of radical politics in the city, leading to the formation of the Bradford Labour Union. The union was socialist in its politics and hosted the founding conference of the Independent Labour Party (which played a vital role in the later founding of the Labour Party) in 1893.

Laundresses in London in 1891 were becoming radicalised and Tom Mann supported them. More male trade unionists began to understand the need to organise among women workers. Trade unions were no longer actively closed to women.

New unionism led to the organisation of tens of thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and the development of the Independent Labour Party. Membership of trade unions increased from 750,000 in 1888 to more than two million by 1900.

It wasn't just the rapid growth in trade union membership that gave birth to new unionism, it was also the shift in consciousness and support for socialist ideas. Working class representation in parliament became necessary to further the cause of workers.

It was the matchwomen, working in the most terrible conditions and for pitiful wages, who became the mothers of modern trade unionism.

## **Russia**

Women throughout history and around the world have played a major role in developing fighting organisations of the working class and initiating huge movements for socialism. In his history of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky wrote:

"In February 1917, in spite of all the directives, the women textile workers in several factories went on strike and sent delegates to the metal workers with an appeal for support." The women were demanding bread and peace. The February revolution had begun. The most exploited in society could take no more. The heroic Greek cleaning women who recently fought tenaciously for their jobs back, played a major role in inspiring others and helped to bring the left wing Syriza to power.

In austerity Britain women are the hardest hit by cuts to public sector jobs, wages and pensions as they make up the majority of that workforce. Their traditional family roles mean that they suffer when services and benefits are cut and women will be left filling the gaps as state services are withdrawn.

As women's economic independence is eroded, their ability to flee domestic violence is threatened and funding for women's refuges has also been cut. Resisting sexual harassment at work is difficult if you are on a zero-hour contract.

Yet the lessons of the rise of new unionism show that it is possible to organise casual workers and fight back against austerity. To do that, we need strong, democratic organisations and a political voice.

Where women and the working class find their struggles thwarted by right wing leaders, the fight will break out elsewhere, as the women involved in the struggle against rent rises on the New Era estate showed and as the magnificent struggle against water charges in Ireland has also demonstrated.

With the growth of numbers of women at work in post-war Britain, women would wear badges stating "a woman's place is in her union". New unionism was the start of a long battle for equality which has not yet been won, despite the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts being law since the 1970s.

We need trade unions that democratically elect leaders committed to fighting for better pay and conditions. And just like the 1880's and 1890's women and men need political representatives that will fight tenaciously on behalf of the working class.

The Labour Party no longer does this. We need representatives like the Socialist Party TDs - Joe Higgins, Ruth Coppinger and Paul Murphy - do in Ireland, and Socialist Alternative's Kshama Sawant does in Seattle.

The work to create a mass party of workers will not be easy or straightforward - just as it wasn't easy or straightforward for workers at the turn of the last century to form the Labour Party - but it is a vital task on the road to socialism and true and lasting equality for women.

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## **Russia: 50,000 march in Moscow after shooting of Boris Nemtsov**

**Rob Jones, CWI Moscow**

Last weekend's planned 'anti-crisis' march organised by the liberal opposition in Moscow was turned into a political protest against terror after one of the organisers, Boris Nemtsov, leader of the Russian Republican Party, was gunned down by an assassin as he was walking past the Kremlin on Friday night.

The police and criminal investigation committee were on the scene within ten minutes but the announced traffic clampdown intended to trap the killer failed to catch anyone.

Within hours, the police were issuing statements that made clear that the main direction of the investigation was aimed at blaming members of the opposition, 'Ukrainian agents' or even jealous family members and that the "murder could have been committed as a provocation intended to destabilise the political position in the country". By only identifying these motives, they are ignoring the other possibilities - that Nemtsov was shot on orders of the authorities directly, by a rogue group within the state or by pro-regime, right-wing thugs.

### **Tensions**

The murder also takes place in the context of heightened tensions between the nationalist-capitalist Putin regime and the US and other western imperialist powers, which have imposed 'targeted sanctions' against Russia over the Ukraine conflict.

Given the past history of the cover-ups of such murders there can be no trust in the current official investigation into Nemstov's killing. An open and independent investigation into all the evidence and all possibilities should be conducted by a commission of elected representatives from the various independent social, political and trade union organisations, so that the killers and those that ordered the slaying can be brought to justice.

While it may be difficult to identify who fired the gun that killed Nemstov (although in past cases low level scapegoats have often been prosecuted without the person who ordered the killings being revealed), it is clear that the political atmosphere of the past period has created the conditions in which something like this was to be expected. Ever since the secession of Crimea, when President Putin spoke of the existence within Russia of "a fifth column - a disparate bunch of national traitors", the state controlled media has been dominated by propaganda against the opposition. Special websites have been set up by pro-Kremlin groups with names such as 'traitor', which list opposition politicians with implicit calls for action against them. Central TV was due to show

another programme in the series 'Anatomy of Protest' which alleges that figures such as Nemtsov are paid agents of the Kiev 'fascist' government.

Before the shooting, Putin had just declared 27 February to be a new holiday - the 'Day of special operations' marking the day a year ago when Russian special forces had taken over the Crimean parliament and replaced the prime minister with a pro-Russian.

Given this, it takes no stretch of the imagination to see that a group of 'patriots' could well have taken it upon themselves to deal with this 'traitor'. It is just as credible to suggest that the murder took place on orders from within the state apparatus in an attempt to frighten the opposition movement into submission.

## **Bolotnoi Protest**

The murder of Nemtsov, it seems, was a further blow to the leadership of the 'Bolotnoi Protest', the movement that developed against the falsification of elections in 2011-2012. Some of its leaders are under house arrest, others are in self-imposed exile.

However, led by 'liberals', this movement does not present a significant challenge to the Putin regime. Nemtsov was only popular among a layer of the urban intelligentsia. He opposed the war in Chechnya and Ukraine but from the point of view of the interests of a section of the elite.

For a period, Nemstov served as deputy prime-minister or regional governor and was closely associated with the disastrous years of 'shock therapy capitalism' under President Yeltsin. This left millions of Russians destitute as a new oligarchy looted the state economy.

Precisely because their support in society was limited, the liberal opposition organisers of the planned march were attempting to widen its appeal by making it into an 'anti-crisis march' but their demands did not go beyond 'fighting corruption'.

Of far more concern to the current regime is the potential for a social explosion linked to the deepening economic crisis. Inflation is running at over 20%, the number of unemployed is expected to grow by 40% this year while the regional press is full of articles about lay-offs and wage cuts. Over 20% of employers admit they have cut wages. As well as the working class, the middle classes can face ruin, once again.

The situation at the Ural wagon factory in western Siberia demonstrates the danger of this crisis to the Putin regime. This factory gained notoriety in 2012 when the regime bussed in workers from the plant to demonstrate their opposition to the Bolotnoi Protest and support for Putin. A 'worker' (actually a director) from the plant was held up as a typical representative of the working class who promised to "come and clear the 'goats' from the square".

Now over 5,000 workers from the factory have been laid off and others complain that their wages have been slashed from 50,000 rubles a month (about £525) to 20,000 rubles. Although it seems that workers are prepared for now to tighten their belts, this will not last indefinitely.

On the demonstration the CWI in Russia distributed over 4,000 leaflets warning that: "Today, Nemtsov has been killed, tomorrow it will be workers and students."

We called for the protest movement to change direction, to orientate to the working class, by combining demands for political democracy with those defending wages, jobs, health and education, aimed at taking the banks and big business into public ownership, so that society can be run in the interests of the majority and not that of the profits of the capitalists.

## **Councils do have a choice:**

# **TUSC councillors table 'no-cuts' budgets**

**Tessa Warrington**

Members of unions Unite, Unison, PCS and RMT watched from the gallery on 25 March as Leicester City Council voted on its annual budget.

Since 2011 over £85 million has been cut from local services in Leicester. Mayor Sir Peter Soulsby's latest cuts budget was passed by the overwhelmingly Labour council.

The city council's Unison branch has publicly criticised the budget for 'disguising' cuts.

Gary Garner, Unison branch secretary, said: "Leicester City Council is hiding behind a policy of organisational change and reviews and carrying out, by stealth, the coalition government's programme of public sector cuts."

Having seen cuts to Sure Start centres, adventure playgrounds, elderly care homes, homeless provision and community centres alongside much more, it's difficult to think what there is left to go.

## **Tax and rents**

However, the Labour-controlled council has found a way, by raising council tax to the maximum threshold, just shy of triggering a referendum, and increasing rents.

Only two voices spoke out in the council against these proposals, the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition councillors Wayne Naylor and Barbara Potter.

They blasted the Labour council for passing on the cuts to working class people and proposed an alternative - a 'People's Budget'.

Instead of stashing away a further £6.9 million on top of the existing £49 million in reserves, why not spend that money now on maintaining jobs and services while launching a fight for the needed money from central government?

Wayne Naylor said: "You say you're saving the reserves for a rainy day. Well look around you - it's raining now! We need to save these services today before they're gone tomorrow."

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## **Hull 'Red Labour' challenges austerity plan**

**Mike Whale, Chair, Hull City Council trade unions**

To cheers from campaigners in the gallery, Hull rebel councillor Dean Kirk moved a "no cuts" amendment to the ruling Labour group's budget proposals for the city. Dean pointed out that if the council drew on its reserves, then no cuts would need to be made.

Dean, a Red Labour councillor backed by TUSC, pointed out that if he was Steve Brady, the Labour Party council leader, he would be ashamed of himself for being praised by the class enemy - Tory local government minister Eric Pickles.

Pickles had previously praised Labour councils for implementing the cuts. His reward to those councils was to give them more cuts!

Brady showed how out of touch he is becoming by claiming that the people of Hull "like what he is doing". This sound bite has already caused a backlash from Labour activists who are more in touch with people's views. They fear that Labour's vote could be cut even more than last year, when Ukip emerged as a serious challenger in some traditional Labour wards.

## **Lobby**

Despite miserable weather, outside the council chamber a lobby of over 200 trade unionists and community activists was joined by a giant inflatable "scabby rat". The rat symbolised deteriorating cleanliness and hygiene linked to cuts the council have implemented.

The Labour leaders in Hull continue to put the blame for the cuts on the Tory government. But their excuses are increasingly pushed to one side because of party leaders Ed Miliband's and Ed Ball's determination to complete the Tory's dirty work if Labour wins the general election. More than ever, the need for a new workers' party is becoming accepted.

A Unite member on the lobby said that he was becoming more frustrated that Unite was supporting Labour while Labour was shafting Unite members. Many national trade union leaders continue to prop up Labour, but rank and file trade unionists in Hull are committed to campaign for Dean Kirk and TUSC candidates in Hull in the May elections.

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## **TUSC**

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) is an electoral alliance that stands candidates against all cuts and privatisation.

In 2015 TUSC aims to stand 100 general and 1,000 council election candidates in the biggest socialist left-of-Labour election challenge for over 60 years.

It involves the RMT transport workers' union, leading members of other trade unions including the PCS, NUT and POA, as well as the Socialist Party and other left and anti-cuts groups and individuals.

[www.tusc.org.uk](http://www.tusc.org.uk)

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## **Natalie Bennett's 'mind blank' interview**

## **The Green Party has no answers**

**Claire Laker-Mansfield**

Natalie Bennett, leader of the Green Party in England and Wales, has had a difficult time lately. The 'excruciating' performance she gave when interviewed about housing policy on LBC radio will surely have resulted in many sleepless nights. Many listeners (after cringing their way through the clips) will feel some sympathy for Natalie. After all, 'mind-blanks' do happen to the best of us. At least she doesn't have the robotic approach of most capitalist politicians.

But what actually lay behind this meltdown was not just one or two forgotten statistics (nor even a nasty cold). Really, it highlighted the limits of the Green Party's overall political approach.

## **Sums**

Natalie's difficulty lay in explaining where her party would get the funding for its pledge to build 500,000 'social rented' homes by 2020. She quoted the figure £2.7 billion. A simple calculation can tell you that this works out at around £5,400 for each house.

Later in the interview she stated that each home would in fact cost £60,000. But, if you include the cost of purchasing the land for these homes, this remains optimistic. When asked where the Green Party would raise the money to fund the project, the only example Bennett could muster was ending tax breaks on mortgages for landlords - a reasonable enough policy, but unlikely to raise enough build to half a million homes.

## **Terms of debate**

The crux of the problem the Greens face is that they have accepted the terms of political debate as laid-out by the capitalist establishment. The so-called 'logic' of crisis-ridden capitalism dictates, for instance, that the national debt, swelled by the billions handed over in bailouts to the banks, must be 'got under control' through austerity measures.

This 'logic' also tells us that, for example, the Duke of Westminster has the right to sit on over 300 acres of land in London and a personal fortune of £1.7 billion. This wealth, afforded to him through no other merit than an accident of birth, allows him to stand in the way of providing decent, affordable housing for the millions in need of it.

Convincingly answering the question 'how would you deal with the housing crisis?' requires more than getting "genned up" before an interview, as right wing LBC host Nick Ferrari suggested was the problem for Bennett. What's really needed is a clear understanding that there is an alternative to the capitalist system and its austerity consensus.

For example, why should it be necessary to spend billions purchasing land on which to build social housing, when this land is owned by multi-millionaires whose wealth has been inherited - or else accumulated through cruel exploitation?

The 'big four' property developers are sitting on enough land to immediately build 1.4 million homes. Their profits have risen by 557% since 2010. Why could that land and the biggest vultures in the construction industry not be nationalised, with compensation paid to current owners only on the basis of genuine need?

What's more, why should it be ordinary people who foot the bill for a crisis created at the top of society? In the last year, the 1,000 richest individuals in Britain increased their wealth by 15% to £520 billion (more than five times the NHS budget).

## **'Logic'**

Socialists reject entirely any 'logic' which argues that the 99% should be made to pay the price for capitalist crisis, responsibility for which lies with the super-rich.

Unlike the Greens, we do not accept the need to 'strike a balance' between the interests of working class people and those of the 1%. We have the advantage of understanding that there is an alternative. We fight for a socialist society, in which production is democratically planned to meet the needs and desires of the many - not to secure profit for the few.

That's why the Socialist Party hopes that when the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (see page 5) gets some air-time - even given the human problems of colds, mind-blanks and fatigue - our understanding of the possibilities for a socialist alternative will stand our representatives in good stead to make the case for a working-class programme which offers decent houses, jobs, services and much more.

## **The Greens and Bristol cuts**

Last week's article in the Socialist on the Green Party in Bristol contained a factual error. We stated that the Green councillors voted for the cuts budget at the 17 February council meeting. In fact they abstained on the Substantive Revenue and Capital Budget for 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 Medium Term Financial Strategy vote according to the council's official webcast of the meeting.

However, abstaining on a budget that will have a further devastating effect on the lives of ordinary Bristolians is unjustifiable, and many will question how committed they are to opposing the cuts.

Within days of the budget vote, the Green Party's assistant mayor and cabinet member with responsibility for the libraries, had to explain why a consultation exercise has recommended the closure of a quarter of them. Councillor Radice said: "This is the horror of austerity. We have to face up to the reality that there will be more cuts..."

They are not providing an anti-cuts strategy or using their position in the council to reach out to community campaigners, service users or council staff. When they present library closure proposals or line up with the mayor to argue for the scrapping of Bristol's no-eviction policy for bedroom tax arrears, they confirm their lack of confidence in a real movement against austerity being built.

This is why TUSC will be contesting every seat in the forthcoming elections in Bristol.

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## **Brighton council stuck in budget stalemate while Greens split**

**Glenn Kelly**

Green-led Brighton council's budget meeting on 26 February ended in a stalemate after five hours, with six Green councillors voting against their own party's budget.

But the main disagreements were not over cuts or no-cuts budgets, but over the choice between Green proposals of a 5.9% council tax increase and £20 million of cuts, Labour's 1.99% council tax increase with £25 million cuts, or the Tories' 0% increase and £26 million cuts.

The council has already cut £70 million, with £25 million set to be axed annually for the next three years.

However, six Green councillors (out of 21) did take a stand and refused to vote for any budget that contained cuts, saying that they "would not vote for another cut, enough was enough".

The leader of the Labour group accused the six of being "middle class revolutionaries" and told them they were inviting in the Tory commissioners to run the council. In response, one of the Green rebels said he didn't believe the Tories would send in the commissioners before the general election, but if they did they would be met with protests and angry pickets.

## Alternative

After the vote, I asked one of the rebel Greens why they had not put forward an alternative 'no-cuts' budget using reserves and borrowing to 'plug the gap'.

I was told that they would have needed a group of at least two for it to be recognised, and this wasn't done as "we wanted to keep people together".

A clear split has opened up in the Brighton Green party membership. A few weeks ago, an all-members meeting voted for a no cuts budget to be set.

But another all-members meeting on 25 February overturned that position by voting to back a 5.9% council tax increase and £20 million cuts position by 75 to 50.

The rebel Greens need a clear strategy for a way forward and using their positions to build a mass campaign to resist the government. The Socialist Party and TUSC locally will seek to work with those who genuinely want to put forward a no-cuts alternative in the coming elections.

As we go to press, the council - where no party has a majority but the Greens are the largest group - is meeting again to see if a new deal can be cobbled up.

The most likely outcome is that Labour and a majority of Greens agree on a budget of cuts and council tax increases.

**Update:** As predicted, Labour and most Green councillors voted through a 1.99% council tax rise on 3 March along with cuts that include 300 job losses. Three Green councillors voted against with two abstaining.

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## TUSC

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It involves the RMT transport workers' union, leading members of other trade unions including the PCS, NUT and POA, as well as the Socialist Party and other left and anti-cuts groups and individuals.

- [www.tusc.org.uk](http://www.tusc.org.uk)

## Discussion in Unite 'United Left' on stance in general election

Socialist Party members in Unite have received an open letter from leading members of Unite who are in United Left (UL), in which Socialist Party members are also organised. *[see below for the letter]*

In the run-up to the General Election, the letter is appealing to socialists not to stand widely in the election but "to do all we can to elect a Labour Government". In reality, this is an appeal to support a government that would be, at best, austerity-lite and a continuation of the crisis that faces working-class people. This prospect has led to a fracturing of politics.

Firstly, it is not just the Socialist Party that is standing in May's polls, which also include elections in local authorities. We are part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) that also comprises the RMT in an official capacity, representing its 80,000 members, and other leading trade unionists from PCS, Unite, NUT and the POA as well as other socialist organisations and individuals. Its federal structure means that whoever stands for TUSC has to be agreed by democratic discussion by the different constituent parts of what is a coalition. It is these collective interests that determine the decision to stand or not.

Actually, not every prospective candidate is automatically agreed. The TUSC steering committee has a flexible approach and considers all factors, not least the political record of the Labour candidate. If the comrades want to argue that TUSC shouldn't contest particular Labour target seats, they could enter a dialogue with the steering committee stating which Labour candidates they mean. For example, the Communist Party is contesting Sheffield Central with a Labour majority of 165, presumably because the Labour candidate is not a clear opponent of austerity. But the letter's authors can't have it both ways. If TUSC is "derisory" in terms of votes, many will ask why is this letter necessary?

To determine in which constituencies TUSC should stand, its supporters have gone through a process of writing to Labour PPCs with a set of demands that many Unite members would consider the minimum for support, such as opposing austerity and reversing Tory cuts, renationalisation of Royal Mail and the railways and repeal of the anti-union laws. The last demand, enshrined in John McDonnell's Trade Union Freedom Bill, was unsuccessful precisely because Labour MPs wouldn't vote for it.

The comrades are right to put this debate in context. All unions and political parties are operating in the austerity offensive, which puts all programmes to the test, as we see on a daily basis in Greece. The acceptance by Labour of the brutal ConDem cuts and the role of Labour councils in passing them on to working-class communities and council workers has led to a debate within the unions and Unite in particular about political representation and whether we can continue to support Labour. Len McCluskey himself has raised that it may be necessary to build an alternative political vehicle depending on the outcome of the election.

The signatories are posing this debate as the Socialist Party on one side and everyone else united in support of Labour on the other. They know full well that this is not the case. There has been a massive debate in Unite and UL about our attitude to Labour. Of course, over and above the attitude of the leadership to austerity or Labour councils, there is also the issue of Falkirk, where Miliband sent in the police against our union for the crime of doing what the comrades want us to do: recruiting people to Labour to transform it into a party that fights for the union's policies.

This led directly to two respected Unite convenors being sacked at Grangemouth by the vicious Ineos management. It was also the trigger for Miliband to use the Collins Review to complete Blair's mission to eradicate the right of the unions to act collectively within Labour in order to end any chance of the organised working class influencing Labour policy. Incidentally, in the UL meeting to discuss Collins at the end of 2013, there was a virtually unanimous vote to oppose Collins, yet Unite voted for it, despite the EC having a clear UL majority.

The tragedy is that the Labour-affiliated unions haven't challenged Labour on the cuts. The fact that the election result is in the balance is a condemnation of Labour. Without an electoral challenge from the left that fights the cuts and privatisation, the space will continue to open up for dangerous interlopers such as UKIP. It is the big unions that should put themselves at the head of such an alternative but, unfortunately, in the absence of this it is left to TUSC to prepare the ground.

The election victory of Syriza has been met with hope by socialists and trade unionists internationally because it was the first breakthrough by an avowedly anti-austerity force in this period. Our union was rightly quick to welcome it but where did Syriza come from? It didn't just appear ready formed but was a decade in the making. Less than three years before coming into government office, the equivalent of Labour was in power, while Syriza's vote was 3.3% in 2004 and 4.6% in 2010. Those fortunes have now been reversed.

A party that fights for this programme is needed now in Britain but you will look in vain for it in Labour. We believe that Unite should disaffiliate from Labour and help create a new party for our class, or at least amend its rules so that it can support Unite members like those in Warrington, Lambeth and Southampton who as Labour councillors wouldn't vote for cuts and were disciplined. It is not insignificant that they and 'rebel' councillors like them are now part of TUSC. Their stand was an attempt to defend Unite members in those councils but in order for those members to support them, we would need to change the union's rules!

This debate is about nothing less than the future for working-class people in this country and included in that are our union's members. Until now, this has been conducted in an open and friendly manner in United Left and we hope that this will continue.

**Rob Williams, Socialist Party**

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## **Open letter to Socialist Party supporters in Unite**

**Comrades,**

This Coalition government has been responsible for attacks on our class that go far beyond anything Thatcher would have dreamed of. Their austerity policies have been targeted on the poor and vulnerable in our society. They have lined the pockets of their Hedge Fund backers and speculators in the City with billions of public money. They have been responsible for attacks on the organised labour movement and have been open in their support for even more draconian legislation if re-elected. New proposed laws which would make effective trade union action virtually illegal - The Tories are not campaigning in this election as the Hug-A-Hoodie, party that can be trusted with the NHS, they are back as The Nasty Party fighting on a class war programme.

While Unite policy is to support Labour, in fact to do all we can to elect a Labour Government, your organisation has decided to stand candidates in the forthcoming general election. Of course

that is your right; we are a trade union not a political party, we do not have any disciplinary means to force you to support union policy and rightly so.

Within the UL there is then a clear political difference; on the one hand the majority, working for a Labour victory who are also intent on developing the left within the Party and your goal, of standing candidates in the election as part of becoming the political alternative to Labour. In our view a big claim for some 1,000 -2,000 people, whose track record in elections is derisory.

While we know we can't dissuade you from standing candidates we consider you have crossed a line by standing candidates in marginals. We would ask you to withdraw your candidates from the 100 Labour must win marginals. In our view standing in these seats is a breach in a working class front against the Tories.

You are not a rival to Labour. While Labour are standing to win every seat and form a Government, you know very well you will not win one seat let alone form a government. Rather your goal is to recruit to, and make propaganda for your organisation.

By standing in marginals you are not just 'building the party' you are also taking votes from Labour - those who vote for you, and those you influence not to vote Labour. While the numbers you convince will be small, in such a tight election where every vote counts you must realise it may mean Labour losing seats, in effect allowing seats to be won by the Tories or their partners in crime the Lib Dems.

The logic of your position goes further; it is to argue, where there is no SP candidate, workers should abstain. If of course we have misunderstood your position then why are you fielding candidates in marginals Labour can win?

The only rationale for this cavalier attitude is because you believe there is no difference between Labour and the other capitalist parties. This is blind sectarianism, yet Labour is supported by nearly every union, and unions are the mass organisations of workers, do the unions not count for anything?

We urge you then as fellow UL members to reconsider standing in marginals and so not breaking the front against the Tories.

Tony Woodhouse UL, Chair Unite Executive Council

Mark Lyons UL, Vice Chair Unite Executive Council

Martin Mayer Chair Unite UL

Terry Abbott UL, Chair North-West Regional Committee

Dick Banks UL, Chair North-East Regional Committee

Liam Gallagher UL, Chair Unite Ireland

Mike Jenkins UL, Chair Unite Wales

Jim Kelly UL, Chair London & Eastern Regional Committee

Gordon Lean UL, Chair South-East Regional Committee

Kev Terry UL, Chair South-West Regional Committee

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## Election appeal 2015

# Donate to fight the 'grand coalition'

Naomi Byron

"Good luck to all TUSC candidates, on to a better future" said Marcus Edwards from Llanelli, posting £50 to the Socialist Party Election Appeal. What a contrast with Gisela Stuart, Labour MP for Edgbaston, who instead of straining every nerve to stop the Tories, has floated the idea of Labour joining a 'grand coalition' with them after the election.

Increasingly people are asking: 'What's the point of Labour?' Set up to be the political voice for the working class and trade unions, Labour has lost touch with ordinary people. The reason that the idea of a 'grand coalition' can even be raised is that the main parties all fundamentally fight for the same thing - making us pay for the bankers' crisis with our jobs and services. Increasingly Labour councillors who want to stand up against the cuts are being forced out of the party. Some have joined TUSC.

Just like the founders of the Labour Party, who stood up to the Liberals and declared the need for a working class force, we need to found a new workers' party that sees its job as representing the 99%, not governing to make Britain safe for the banks.

The TUSC election challenge this May is the best answer to all the Gisela Stuarts - Labour won't represent us, so we will build our own alternative.

Thanks to all who have donated so far, including Ron Phillips, who has paid the first instalment of his £250 pledge, Trevor Palmer towards his pledge of £300, Mark Andrews towards his pledge of £75, Claire Wren towards her pledge of £50 and a Coventry Unison member who has finished paying a pledge of £110. Also Ronnie and Claire Job (£100), Bill Murray (£100), Bryan and Barbara from Hatfield (£700), and Judy Griffiths (£100).

You can donate on [www.socialistparty.org.uk/donate](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/donate), phone 020 8988 8777 to make a card payment, or post a cheque made out to "Socialist Party" to PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD. Please mark your donation "election appeal 2015".

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## Firefighters' strike and demo

Firefighters across England were on strike for 24 hours on Wednesday 25th February. They assembled to march and demonstrate in London together with other Fire Brigade Union members from across the UK.

The FBU's leaders have condemned government ministers for ignoring three written requests by the union in the last few weeks to meet to try to resolve the dispute.

## 'Liar, liar, pants on fire'

**James Ivens**

Striking firefighters made their feelings clear on 25 February - by hoisting flaming y-fronts in protest at Tory lies.

The day of very solid strike action culminated in thousands defying police, marching unannounced on parliament.

The union refused to pay for private 'traffic management' measures and blockaded the streets in protest.

"You bunch of mischief makers!" laughed Matt Wrack, general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). He was answering fire minister Penny Mordaunt, who he quoted as saying: "the FBU continues to cause mischief over pensions".

Mordaunt is responsible for legislation hiking firefighters' retirement age. She won the vote in parliament by telling MPs pensions would be guaranteed for firefighters found unfit due to age. But the law provides no such guarantee.

Matt was addressing 2,000 striking firefighters in Methodist Central Hall, opposite parliament. A further thousand were held outside due to lack of space.

The platform - sat before a tremendous church organ lit in red - included no fewer than three Labour MPs.

John McDonnell MP took up "mendacious" Mordaunt's dismissal of mass protests - she said they are "just the militants of the FBU". Pointing into the crowd, he declared: "If standing up for your rights is militant - I'm a militant, you're a militant, you're a militant!"

Ian Lavery MP recognised he could no longer say "vote Labour for vote Labour's sake", particularly after Tony Blair's attacks on firefighters' pay and conditions.

But his answer? Vote Labour! "Whether you're a member of the Socialist Party, Ukip, Labour or the Conservatives, I'm telling you there's only two people can be prime minister. David Cameron and Ed Miliband."

This is likely true. And 'Red Ed' did call for a vote against Mordaunt's pensions theft. But her attacks are based on proposals originally put by Labour - and earlier legislation backed by Labour.

And how long can even this feeble stance last, given Miliband has signed up wholesale to Tory spending plans? Labour has not even promised to reverse the increases in retirement age and pension contributions if in power after May.

This is why Kate Hoey MP said: "We want it in the manifesto!" The Socialist Party agrees. So how does she propose we achieve this? By weakly calling for firefighters to "demand much more that [MPs] listen".

But firefighters have taken strike action more than 50 times and launched mass lobbying! When it comes to the unions, Labour's hearing is selective to say the least.

If trade unions want their interests represented, they need to stand candidates accountable to them - not to big business. The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) exists to allow just that.

Firefighters gave a standing ovation for victimised Buckinghamshire FBU member Ricky Matthews during the closing speech.

And Matt Wrack rightly condemned the Metropolitan Police's cuts-based decision to make organisers buy private security for demonstrations. "This union is not paying for the right to protest!" To prove it, he led 3,000-odd cheering firefighters to parliament and Downing Street.

FBU bagpipers played as strikers demanded an audience with Mordaunt and David Cameron.

Some wore foot-long Pinocchio noses. Two came forward in "FBU cleaning team" overalls and scoured the gates of parliament with sponge and toilet brush.

While some Labour MPs may scrub up well, they still go in and vote for cuts. That is why growing numbers of trade unionists - including firefighters - are looking to TUSC.

The FBU has said clearly to the government: guarantee firefighters' pensions - or we are not afraid of action. The union's members will have renewed confidence in this battle following an excellent demonstration. Now the FBU needs to lay out an industrial and political strategy that can take this mood forward.

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## Stop the Crossrail sackings!

**Rob Williams, National Shop Stewards Network chair**

For the third Monday in succession, construction workers and their supporters held a protest outside a Crossrail site to demand that a worker sacked for raising safety issues be reinstated.

Two weeks ago, protesters blocked the road outside the Bond Street site in London after an electrician was sacked after he had asked for a proper walkway with hand rails. During that protest, we got word that he had been out on fully paid 'gardening leave' while his union Unite waited for a meeting to discuss what job he would be put on.

His 'employer', an agency that is subcontracting to a consortium of known blacklisters, Skanska and Costain, has now written to him saying that it is confirming what it told him originally, that he was 'let go' because of lack of work. Yet it told him before his one week of employment that there were three years of work!

We stopped the traffic outside the site last time but this time the police were mob-handed. So workers just had an impromptu march up the middle of Oxford Street behind the National Shop Stewards Network banner to the Hanover Square site where we blocked the delivery gates!

### Whitechapel

Last Monday, there was a protest outside the Whitechapel Crossrail site because workers had been let go, as in sacked, after they had requested torches that could be attached to their helmets because it was so dark in the tunnels.

On the Saturday after the workers were dismissed, there were 13 incidents where workers fell because it was too dark! There is now a video going round Facebook which shows the reality of working conditions in the Whitechapel tunnels.

To show how serious this issue is, workers went from the Whitechapel protest to a vigil outside the St Pancras coroner's court as the inquest began into the death last year of Crossrail worker Rene Tkacik. It's a scandal that workers are getting sacked for nothing more than raising health and safety issues when someone has actually died on the job.

And this victimisation is happening at the very time that the long running blacklisting case continues at the High Court! All this on the biggest public sector contract in the UK, with its £15 billion worth of taxpayers' money.

Many workers will be asking if this is revenge for the reinstatement last year of Frank Morris (who has just been elected onto the Unite executive committee), after being sacked by Crossrail contractor BFK.

All these issues are tied up together. The bosses, in conjunction with government, want maximum profit from a public contract, which means screwing workers. Crossrail should be a flagship project with direct employment on JIB pay and terms and conditions. Yet it's mainly the normal scandalous agency/umbrella contracting, with blacklisting continuing.

This coming Saturday, activists from the building trade will be meeting in Glasgow at a joint meeting of the Blacklist Support Group and Unite Construction Rank and File. They will be discussing all the issues in construction and how to defeat the bosses' current offensive on Crossrail.

Some workers have raised whether Unite should call a national demonstration and lobby Boris Johnson, tied to a leverage campaign. The NSSN would support these initiatives but they must be linked to building the unions on the Crossrail sites, which is the only way to beat the 'hire and fire' regime.

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## **More school unions join Lewisham anti-academies strike**

**Roger Shrives**

On 5 March, members of Lewisham National Union of Teachers in four schools will be on strike again, this time with the welcome addition of NASUWT and GMB union members in the schools.

The action started well on 25 February when the Stop Academies in Lewisham (SAiL) campaign organised over 70 teachers, school students and parents in an excellent meeting.

SAiL is fighting the plans of three Prendergast Federation schools (Hilly Fields, Ladywell Fields and the Vale) to force them out of the control of Lewisham's local council and into academies. Workers at Sedgemoor school, also threatened, will also strike on 5 March.

Prendergast governors ignored the Lewisham NUT-led strike on 12 February and applied for an academy order.

## Inspired

Inspired by an excellent report on how Hove Park school in Brighton had beaten academy plans, the meeting discussed how to win in Lewisham.

The south London borough's NUT secretary (and TUSC candidate in Lewisham West and Penge) Martin Powell-Davies said that academisation threatened the pay and conditions of teachers and other staff.

Academies do not give children a better education; they can systematically exclude students from poorer backgrounds.

Neither do they give financial help to schools. Nearly half of academy trusts have paid millions of public money towards the private businesses of directors, trustees and relatives, as the National Audit Office reported last year.

Teachers spoke of their fury at the academy lovers' decision while students talked about their condescending treatment by the school tops. Dozens of teachers, students and parents volunteered to help spread the message that these academy plans can be beaten.

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## ICO staff on strike for fair pay

**Hugh Caffrey**

PCS members working at the Information Commissioners Office in Wilmslow, Cheshire, are escalating their campaign of strike action for fair pay.

Top management are awarding themselves pay rises of up to 18%, while insisting that when it comes to pay for ordinary staff members then money is hard to come by! Workers have been offered 3% in return for giving up pay progression.

Rightly this insult has been rejected with over half of staff refusing to sign management's letters accepting this imposed 'offer'. 95% of PCS members began a three-day strike on 26 February with the largest-ever picket lines at the site, defying the pouring rain!

**Paddy Dillon, PCS branch secretary, told me:**

"We're on strike to demand fair pay at all grades at the ICO because we've seen our three most senior executives get average pay rises of 11%, between 8 and 18% that is, while they've offered ordinary staff a deal that's within the 1% Treasury pay cap.

"It's clearly unfair that senior executives are giving themselves these huge rises while everyone else is being told they don't deserve a pay rise in line with other organisations that are comparable to the ICO.

"There's a lot of anger on this, support's really strong, we've seen our membership rise in the last few weeks to support the strike action.

"It's gone really well, the two-day strike at the start of February was extremely well supported, 95% of members were on strike, and today looks absolutely solid too.

"We've got bigger picket lines than ever, momentum's all building the right way. We've just got to get management to accept that they've got to negotiate properly with us, not just try to impose a deal that's so inadequate.

"We've got the three-day strike beginning today and on Monday it's going to coincide with the ICO's Data Protection Conference in Manchester which is a huge annual event with 750 delegates.

"We're going to lobby that conference and meet the delegates, we've got leaflets designed to inform them of the ICO pay dispute, and the disparity between our staff and the acceptable pay rates on offer elsewhere. That's going to be massive, and it'll put ICO pay in the spotlight."

- Send messages of support to [icobranchpcs@gmail.com](mailto:icobranchpcs@gmail.com)
- Join the lobby: Monday 2 March, 8-10am, Manchester Central Convention Centre (GMEX), Manchester city centre.

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This version of this article was first posted on the Socialist Party website on 26 February 2015 and may vary slightly from the version subsequently printed in The Socialist.

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## Build the left in CWU elections

**Clive Walder, CWU telecoms sector**

Communication Workers Union (CWU) members will shortly be electing a new general secretary as well as national and sector executives.

Existing general secretary Billy Hayes is seeking re-election for the last time before his retirement. He is being opposed by the postal deputy general secretary Dave Ward.

Ward has been making left noises during the campaign but doesn't have a track record of delivering left policies.

Royal Mail was privatised without a shot being fired in anger under his watch in 2013.

Billy Hayes was a founder member of the old Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) Broad Left. He has had consistently identified with the left and has spoken on both Socialist Party and National Shop Stewards Network platforms. Union members should back Hayes.

### Telecoms

Telecoms sector elections will give members a chance to register opposition to the current executive's signing of an agreement last September which enshrined lower pay and longer hours for new staff.

The Broad Left, which is standing more candidates than before, will oppose any further attacks on pay and conditions.

It calls for an industrial action ballot if the latest agreement on performance management fails to improve conditions and for the conversion of all agency staff to BT contracts.

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# Newcastle united against far-right bigots

**The UK franchise of far-right German anti-Muslim group Pegida organised a demonstration in Newcastle on 28 February. A few hundred turned up. The Socialist Party was central to the much larger counter-demonstration, alongside other supporters of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC). William Jarrett reports on a clear victory over the racist louts.**

By 9.30am, in the centre of Newcastle, hundreds had already gathered to defy the far-right minority assembling in our city. By 10am we had exceeded the expected 2,000 participants.

This counter-demonstration organised by trade unionists and socialists quickly became a magnet for the working class of our city. Football supporters gathering ahead of the match; workers leaving their night shifts; Tyne and Wear Metro commuters exiting nearby stations. All were drawn to the electrified and carnival-like atmosphere.

Dozens of local trade unionists - from Unison, Unite, CWU, NUT and more - rallied around the TUSC banner. A local Unison branch chair enthusiastically held the banner high. We reminded him "you're still in the Labour Party!" He replied: "I'm a socialist first. There's no Labour banner here!"

TUSC supporters led chants against the minority of bigots trying to populate our streets with hatred. Onlookers broke into cheers and applause.

Paul Phillips, TUSC prospective parliamentary candidate for Newcastle East, took to the megaphone. He articulated our support for migrant workers. The working class must be united against our true enemy: the super-rich who dictate cuts and privatisation.

Transport union RMT was out in force with numerous flags and banners. Their presence was quiet, firm, and dignified - a smiling buttress against far-right menace.

Towards the end, a few courageous reactionaries - obviously intoxicated - attempted to break police lines. They were (most unfortunately) mowed down by the rear of a horse. Our sympathy for them is limited, and not just because they're drunken bigots. The far right and the capitalists they defend would do the same to us - and more - given the chance. The thugs wouldn't have stood a chance against the mass of trade unionists there anyway.

Speakers from a wide range of Newcastle communities were represented at the closing rally. Lizi Gray, Northumbria University student and Socialist Party activist, delivered a rousing speech - declaring: "This is a working class city! We are united!"

One TUSC supporter asked a well-known, left-leaning Anglican priest: "Father, will you exorcise these fascists?" He sternly replied, "No - but I'll excommunicate them!"

Numerous rank-and-file trade unionists and others expressed support for TUSC, and asked about forthcoming activities as well as how to get involved.

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# Campaign victory saves ten children's centres

**Tony Mulhearn and Dave Walsh, Liverpool TUSC prospective parliamentary candidates**

Liverpool TUSC congratulates Save Our Sure Start Children's Centres for rescuing ten from closure. Their magnificent victory demonstrates clearly that an effective campaign can produce results.

We note that Labour mayor Joe Anderson has used the city's financial reserves as part of the package to keep the centres open. We give full support to a continuance of the campaign to save them permanently, and not stay reliant on this short-term solution.

We would also like to point out that those same reserves can be used to save other services lost during the butchery of the last two years.

## Lament

TUSC believes that Mayor Anderson's constant lament - that nothing can be done to stem the approaching £56 million of further cuts - is wrong. We call for the city council to spearhead a mass campaign, appealing to local authority trade unions and other Labour councils to join. Their combined weight could force this rotten, corrupt government - now revealed as the fat-cat tax dodgers' political wing - to retreat.

Such a bold approach could restore the money unjustly stolen from our city. Liverpool's Labour council did just this in the 1980s, when it was led by supporters of Militant, forerunner of the Socialist Party.

Councillors, including Tony Mulhearn, won £60 million back from Thatcher. But if Labour isn't willing to fight today - TUSC is.

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## Campaigns news in brief

### Northern conference

It is clear the Socialist Party Northern region is taking important steps forward in party building.

At our conference on 28 February we had a number of shop stewards from various unions. This included Steve Nevin, who likened the party to a small stone pushed from a mountain top that causes an avalanche. He commented: "Woe betide anyone who gets in the way of that avalanche!"

The conference raised £180 fighting fund appeal and sold £50 of books.

**Elaine Brunskill**

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### Bradford lobby

Walking through Bradford at times, it is palpable the amount of people begging on the streets. The latest cuts will further impoverish this city. If you are a Whitehall minister with no actual clue where Bradford is, job done I suspect.

About 30 lobbied the town council on 26 February to protest £170 million in cuts. The city will have seven TUSC candidates in May's local elections.

**Peter Robson**

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## **Leeds students protest**

Youth work students from Leeds Beckett University joined the lobby of the council's budget-setting meeting organised by Leeds trades council.

This year sees an extra £50 million cut, on top of around £200m passed in recent years. The council will have lost 2,000 staff, as well as countless services including day centres and care homes.

Council home rents are due to go up by an inflation-busting 5.9%.

**Iain Dalton**

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## **Flagship at half mast**

Labour-run Birmingham council has cut the opening time of its flagship Central Library (only opened in September 2013) from 73 hours a week to 40. To add insult to injury, the Institute of Directors is opening an office in the premises.

**Clive Walder**

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## **Notts care cuts**

Labour-run Nottinghamshire council has agreed to close three of its last six council-run care homes.

Over 10,000 signed petitions opposing the closure of all six - the original proposal. The campaign saved three.

Our fight goes on, but closures will probably mean 50 long-term residents moving to private homes and 100 job losses.

**Pete Watson, Nottinghamshire Unison (personal capacity)**

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## **Carmarthenshire cuts**

A £45 million cuts budget was passed by Carmarthenshire council thanks to the backing of Labour and independent councillors.

But, as stated at the meeting, the council has £73.5 million in reserves which have doubled in the last five years. They should implement Carmarthenshire Unison's no-cuts budget.

The council will find it a lot easier to vote for cuts than implement them. They have already backed down repeatedly when pressure is put on them. This pressure will build. If Labour councillors won't oppose cuts then we need councillors that will.

**Mark Evans, Carmarthenshire Unison (personal capacity)**

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## May Day greetings in the Socialist

The Socialist reports the victories that show that if you fight back you can win - from housing workers' disputes in Britain, to cleaners in Greece.

And we don't just report workers' strikes and the anti-cuts movement. We put forward a strategy to defeat the cuts, and to fight for a socialist alternative.

Our writers are real working-class fighters, actively involved in the struggles they report - from workplaces, communities, universities and schools.

Previous years' May Day appeals have resulted in fantastic displays of the respect and authority the Socialist commands in the workers' movement. Let's make sure we do at least as well in 2015, and keep our paper number one.

Help the Socialist continue that work with a May Day greeting this year.

Get a 25% discount by paying by Wednesday 8 April. Final deadline Wednesday 15 April 2015. Greeting price guide: £500 for a whole page (£375 before 8 April); £300 for a half-page (£225); £170 quarter-page (£127.50); £90 one-eighth (£67.50); £50 one-sixteenth (£37.50); £30 1/32 (£22.50); £20 small box (£15). Other rates are available. For enquires please contact us at the details below.

Phone 020 8988 8781 Email [jamesivens@socialistparty.org.uk](mailto:jamesivens@socialistparty.org.uk)

Give your greeting online at [www.socialistparty.org.uk/mayday](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/mayday)

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